

The Moral of the Story

by Syl

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Summary: Dick Grayson arrives in NYC with a new look and discovers his emerging love for Kory.

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Summary: Having burned his bridges with Gotham City, Dick Grayson arrives in NYC with a new look and superhero persona and resumes his mantle of leadership with the Teen Titans; he also begins a new and interesting relationship with Princess Koriand'r. Now, if he can only convince Alfred that he and Kory are just "good friends"?

Acknowledgement: I'd like to thank the author of the joke that my husband sent me; as soon as I read it, I knew that it was crying out for a Dick and Kory spin to it. My apologies for using it without permission. Oh, and further apologies to the continuity police. I know the costume is wrong for the time in question, but what can I say? I love Dick's current costume and *hate* the two earlier versions, so there! :)

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The Moral of the Story by Syl Francis (based on a joke her husband sent her)

"Truth is the safest lie." (Jewish proverb)

Dick winced at the sudden crash from the kitchen. That was the third glass in thirty minutes. He sighed and shook his head. He had a bad feeling about this evening, but Kory had insisted. Dinner was almost ready and the guest of honor would be arriving in another ten minutes.

Knowing who their dinner guest was, Dick knew that the doorbell would ring in exactly . . . he checked his watch . . . nine minutes, twenty-eight seconds and counting.

"Better check and see if she's okay," he said to himself. As he moved quickly towards the kitchen, Dick's mind flashed back to the night almost four weeks ago when he arrived in New York City. He'd been crossing the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan when he heard the sirens . . .

. . . Dick checked his watch. Damn! Almost ten thirty p.m. He'd hoped to reach Titans Island before midnight. It looked like he'd be stuck here for several more hours. Traffic was at a complete standstill. Hardly an unusual occurrence since this was New York, but Dick was nevertheless curious.

He quickly maneuvered his motorcycle around the stopped traffic. He ignored the angry shouts and raised fists from motorists he passed and soon arrived at a point that was so congested, that even a lone bike couldn't squeeze through.

Looking around, he spied a way to circumvent traffic: the Brooklyn Bridge's famous pedestrian walkway. The American poet Walt Whitman once proclaimed the view from there as "the best most effective medicine my soul has yet partaken." Thankfully, the walkway was empty at this time of night. Gunning his motorcycle, Dick expertly brought the rpms up, and releasing the brakes, seemed to fly across the safety barriers.

Landing with a screech and a roar, Dick spun his bike and headed in the direction of the sirens. As he neared the sounds, he suddenly became aware of helicopters, searchlights, and police bullhorns. Finally, up at the top of the tower nearest the Manhattan side, he saw a man crazily waving his arms. Dick couldn't see much, but assumed the worst.

"Probably some nutcase who wants to blow up the bridge and everyone on it, including himself," Dick thought aloud. "Great. I'm not even in the city yet, and I've already found trouble. This looks like a job for Rob--!"

Dick stopped short.

"Uh, no, it looks like job for, Ni--" he stopped chagrinned. "Well, it looks like a job for me, anyway."

It was going to be hard to get used to the new name. He couldn't even say it in his head yet without hesitating in embarrassment. But Robin was dead. Dick had it on good authority. The Joker had killed him. All the newspapers said so. Besides, Robin hadn't appeared in public

since the night that the Joker supposedly shot him. What more proof did he need?

Robin was dead.

Working fast in the cover afforded by the deeper shadows of the tower and gigantic suspension cables, Dick took a small carryall from his saddlebags and quickly changed. Pressing a palm sized remote control device, the bike suddenly locked down, protected by a sleek, black armored shell.

Reaching up he touched the hidden control unit in his mask and activated the night vision goggles, instantly turning the night into day. Next, he activated his telescopic sights and quickly assessed the target: Male, Caucasian. Approximately thirty-five years old. Five-nine, one hundred-eighty pounds. Wearing the latest in quasi-military battle dress uniform.

"And what's style without the proper accessories?" Dick mused. "Well, sure looks like this whacko's dressed to the nines . . . complete with exploding *vest*!"

The perpetrator was wired with dynamite and plastique. He was set to go off in a display that would rival the Bridge's annual Fourth of July fireworks display.

"Well, I wanted to test the new costume," Dick said fatalistically. He fired a grappling line from his right hand gauntlet. It felt weird working without a utility belt. He'd practiced with the new uniform on his cross-country trip back from California, but he'd hoped to do a few simulated combat runs in the Titans training room.

Nothing like combat testing.

As he rose, Dick went over his plan in his head. It would take delicate timing. He'd hate for Ni--uh, his debut to be his swan song. Clearing the double gothic arches of the tower, Dick released his line and went into freefall. He latched onto a small finger hold and easily swung his body over the top.

Dick's black uniform with a midnight blue stylized "wing" across his chest blended into the shadows, a wraith protected by the deeper blackness of the moonless night. The crazy kaleidoscope of searchlights, the Bridge lights, and the NYC skyline made for a confusing mixture of light and shadow. Fortunately, Dick was used to working under worse conditions: Gotham City.

He spotted the target.

As he was about to take him out, he was interrupted by the sudden unearthly blasts of energy bolts, instantly followed by a golden streak immediately zooming over him. Starfire!

No! he cried in frustration. What did she think she was *doing*? Didn't she know that the target was wired to explode? Not stopping to think, Dick fired out a second line; this time, he aimed it at Starfire. The grappling hook found its mark--Starfire's ankles--and instantaneously began to loop around them.

Before Starfire could react, he pulled.

"X'Hal!" Starfire cried.

Caught off guard, she lost momentum and began to tumble to earth. The warrior princess recovered quickly, however, and in anger, turned and fired her starbolts at the offending line that imprisoned her. Her energy bolts easily turned Dick's heavy nylon safety line into so much slag, and with a snarl of rage, she then turned on him.

"Who *dares*?" Starfire asked in fury.

Her keen eyesight spotted Dick in the shadows and she let loose with her starbolts. Dick instantaneously rolled, dove, and somersaulted faster than he'd ever moved in his entire life. Starfire's bolts narrowly missed him by fractions of millimeters. He could actually smell the oxygen in the air around him burn from the intensity of the heat given off by the energy beams.

Managing to avoid getting himself fried suddenly became Dick's number one priority!

As Starfire turned for a second run, Dick saw that the bomber was hurrying towards the edge of the tower.

"Oh, no you don't," he said. Pulling out his own specially designed throwing disks, Dick quickly let three fly. The first struck the bomber on the head, stunning him; the second and third hit him on his right wrist and behind his right knee respectively. The bomber fell over from the triple attack. As Dick threw his disks, he raced across the short distance that separated him from the bomber.

Dick saw him make a move towards his vest. Not pausing, Dick threw the last new addition to his fighting tools: escrima sticks. The sticks flew true and struck the target with a nice resounding thud. Dick caught the man, before he could hit the ground and gently laid him down.

At this point, Dick was suddenly struck from behind by a freight train. He felt himself roughly lifted and dropped suddenly from a short height. Instinctively righting himself, Dick landed easily and gracefully on his feet. He looked a male danseur executing a spectacular though not particularly difficult leap.

As he landed, he hurried over to the bomber. He needed to defuse the bomb before anyone was hurt. He sensed the incoming attack from behind. Quickly rolling right, Dick executed a series of dazzling moves that anyone who knew him would recognize instantly as his personal style. That is, anyone who'd had reason to watch him closely.

It worked.

"X'Hal! Dick!" Starfire cried. Dick sighed.

"So much for secret identities," he muttered. "Why do I even bother?"

She almost flew into his arms, but Dick waved her back.

"It's too dangerous to approach! He's wired with dynamite and

plastique! I don't have my T-comunit. Call the Tower. Get Kid Flash out here. We need his speed!" Starfire nodded and did immediately as ordered.

Dick, meanwhile, approached the bomber cautiously. He was unconscious. Touching his mask's control unit, Dick ran a quick analysis of the explosives' properties and instantly felt a visceral reaction.

"It's bad," he whispered.

"What do we have?"

Dick turned at the sound of the new voice. Kid Flash.

"Hey, who are you, buddy?" Kid Flash asked suspiciously. "What's going on here? Starfire said that Rob--"

"Never mind that, Fleetfeet. We've gotta disarm this thing before the whole tower goes. I thought he had the detonator wired to a deadman's switch, but he didn't, thank God for small favors." Dick knelt next to the bomber. "But what we *do* have is almost as bad . . . It's on a timer, and it's counting down."

Dick pointed to the digital readout: two minutes, forty-five seconds and counting.

"You're the only one fast enough, Kid Flash. There are four wires and countless combinations thereof. You have to disconnect and reconnect faster than the signal can reach the detonator, until you find the right combination that disarms it. Think you can do that?"

"Starfire's right," Kid Flash said ironically. "Only *you* could come up with a crazy plan like that!"

Dick grinned.

"What're friends for?" he asked expansively. "Be my guest, Doctor Twinkletoes."

Kid Flash sighed, but proceeded to do as ordered.

As he worked, the rest of the Titans suddenly appeared, Wonder Girl in the lead. Dick waved them all away. Starfire quickly flew over to the team, and herded them to a safer distance.

"Did it!" Kid Flash said triumphantly. Dick grinned and reached across the newly disarmed bomber and shook his best friend's hand. They carefully removed the "vest" from the perpetrator, and waved the civilian authorities in.

"By the way, what am I supposed to call you now?" Kid Flash asked. No answer. He turned around. Dick was gone. For the umpteenth time he wondered again, "How does he *do* that?"

As the authorities and Titans moved in, Dick moved stealthily back into the shadows and effectively disappeared into the night. He moved like a whisper back to the spot where he'd parked his bike. Donning his civilian clothes over his costume, Dick mounted his motorcycle

and continued on his interrupted journey back to Titans Tower.

As he rode through the jungles of Manhattan, Dick again sensed rather than saw someone coming up from behind him. Unexpectedly executing a 180-degree turn, Dick suddenly turned in the direction of whoever the attacker was.

He almost slammed into Starfire!

She was flying just behind and a little above him. Dick cut suddenly to the right to avoid a head-on collision with his teammate. Somehow he managed to keep his bike upright. When he brought it to a complete stop, he paused for a few minutes and released his breath slowly.

Dick turned deliberately to look behind him. Starfire was shyly standing in the middle of street, her hands behind her back. She smiled uncertainly at him, unsure of her welcome. That was the second time tonight that she'd almost killed him.

Dick climbed off his motorcycle and just stood there, staring at her. The scene reminded him of a fake shoot-out he'd watched while at an amusement park in Texas. He grinned suddenly. Before long he began chuckling, softly at first. The whole situation just seemed so ludicrous. They'd just stopped some crazy nutso from blowing up the Brooklyn Bridge, and he'd almost been killed by his own teammate. Dick found himself guffawing out loud.

Starfire stared at him strangely, a hurt expression on her open, expressive face.

"I'm sorry, Starfire," Dick apologized, sensing the reason for her discomfiture. "I'm not laughing at you, believe me. I'm just so glad to still be alive! I mean the stories of my death have been greatly exaggerated!"

Starfire smiled. She didn't budge, however. It was Dick's move.

It was Dick's turn to feel uncertain. Kory's profession of love from a few months ago suddenly echoed in his mind, "I'm in love with you, Dick Grayson . . . Think about that . . . "

Climbing back on his bike, he slowly circled it over to where she stood.

"Would you care for a ride home?" he asked smiling. Starfire smiled back and nodded. Dick pulled out his spare helmet and handed it to her. Scooting forward slightly, he made room for her behind him. Once she was comfortably settled in, her arms tentatively around his waist, Dick cautiously brought the bike up to the speed limit and rode quietly through the city that never slept.

Dick spent that night in Kory's apartment, lying awake in her spare bedroom. It took all of his training and self-discipline to remain in his room. It was almost three a.m. when they arrived at her apartment and almost four when he finally got into bed. As exhausted as he felt, he couldn't sleep. Furthermore, he was honest enough with himself to admit that it wasn't because of an adrenaline rush left over from his battle with the Brooklyn Bridge Bomber, either.

Since that day so long ago that she'd confessed her love of him, images of Kory had haunted his days and nights. Dick thought and dreamed of her continuously during his solo trek across the US. Now, once again, thoughts of her kept intruding, defeating any hopes of sleep. As he lay awake in her guestroom, separated by just a couple of doors between them, Dick finally admitted that Kory was the real reason he'd returned to NYC.

The next morning, over a breakfast of orange juice, coffee, and bagels, Kory invited him to stay with her until he found an apartment.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Kory," Dick said. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine!"

"But where will you stay, Dick? Are you planning on living at Titans Tower? As nice as the facilities are, they're not exactly built for comfort and warmth. Besides, Dick, after being with the Titans all day, I just can't picture anyone wanting to spend all night with them as well."

"Actually, I was planning on staying at the *Y*," Dick said. "I've traveled all over the country in the past six months, and whenever I ran low on funds, the Y always provided a clean room in which to stay."

"Absolutely not!" Kory said, shocked that Dick was actually contemplating such a thing. "I refuse to take *no* for an answer! What kind of teammate or friend would I be if I let you stay with strangers?" She shook her head. "I insist, Dick! Please . . . at least temporarily."

Dick agreed reluctantly; he told himself that he should be grateful for her generous offer. Besides, he'd only stay with her for a few days, until he could find his own place, probably by the end of the week.

However, Dick and Kory soon discovered a growing love that could only be likened to white-hot intensity. As their relationship increased in passion and depth of emotion, Dick kept extending the "temporary" status of his stay.

Dick felt somewhat taken aback by the force of his feelings. He'd never been this happy, this free, this totally at ease with another person, nor this frightened and unsure of his feelings. He wondered if what he and Kory were feeling was unique to them or if all people in love felt as they did . . .

. . . And now their happiness was about to be intruded upon. They were about to entertain an unwanted visitor. Perhaps *unwanted* was a bit strong. Their guest was always welcome in Dick's mind; he just wished he knew why he'd called to ask to come over.

"Probably just to check on me," Dick said. He sighed and checked his watch again. The doorbell was going to ring in another seven minutes, twenty-two seconds.

His guardian, Bruce Wayne, had made it quite clear that he didn't

want anything to do with Dick if Dick didn't live his life according to Bruce's rules. Why is he checking on me now? Is he afraid that living away from home, I could hurt myself getting out of bed? Falling in the shower? Sticking my hand in the garbage disposal?

Bruce had sort of gone a little over the edge when Dick was almost killed by the Joker. He'd made Dick promise to never wear the Robin costume again. Until that terrible night, billionaire Bruce Wayne and his college-aged ward and heir, Dick Grayson had fought crime together as the Dynamic Duo, Batman and Robin.

"That was then; this is now!" Dick muttered. "Oh, can it, Grayson! Stop your whining. What's done is done! So get over it! Our guest will be here soon. Remember your manners. He's the best friend you ever had."

"Kory, hon," he said. She was busy picking up broken shards of glass. "Are you all right?" To his dismay, he saw that she was crying. He moved quickly to her. "Kory! What *is* it? Honey, what's the matter?"

Dick quickly and carefully took the shards of glass from her hands and threw them in the kitchen garbage can. He led her to the kitchen sink and made sure that she carefully and thoroughly washed her hands. Finally, he led her to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair, and sat down, Kory on his lap. She buried her head on his shoulder.

"Kory," he said helplessly. "Tell me what the matter is . . . please!" Dick was still new at this type of relationship; he just didn't know what he was supposed to do.

Kory nodded her head. Finally, she sat up, wiped her eyes, and tearfully began to speak.

"It's just that . . . Dick, are you *ashamed* of me?" she asked.

"*Ashamed* of you?" he asked shocked. "What are talking about? Whatever put that thought in your head?"

"You said that we're supposed to tell him that we're just roommates. That you're only staying here until you get your own place. I just don't understand. Why can't we tell him that we're in love?"

Dick took a deep breath. They'd gone over this already, but apparently his lame-o explanations had no more convinced Kory, than they'd convinced him. How could he make her understand? The man who'd raised him; the man whom he loved like a father was a great big, bona fide, xenophobe. Bruce still didn't completely trust *Superman* for heaven's sake, because the Man of Steel was an alien!

Furthermore, Bruce still thought of Dick as a child. It just didn't seem to be the right time to let his guardian know that he was not only in love with a beautiful extraterrestrial, but that he was in the middle of a passionate, physical relationship with her.

It wasn't that he actually cared what Bruce thought anymore, Dick told himself, but there were so many things at the moment that were

wrong between them, and the corpse that used to be their close relationship, that he just couldn't bring himself to add another nail to the coffin.

"Kory, honey, please. I know it's deceitful, but trust me . . . this is for the best. I know it's hard to understand. Hell, I don't understand it myself. But some cultures here on earth, heck some families, have some strange ideas about when and how a child is considered an adult."

Kory gave him an uncomprehending look. He gave her a "what can I say" shrug, then smiled and kissed her nose. Before she could turn his playful peck into a more heated kiss, he pulled back and teasingly placed his right index finger on her lips.

"Some cultures have specific birthdays that when a kid reaches it, he or she is then considered a full member of their adult community. Others have what we call rites of passages. While others have no set rules. Unfortunately that's where many parental/off-spring problems manifest themselves. Bruce says I'm still a kid; I beg to differ. I say I'm a man and deserve to be treated like a man. We had a difference of opinion, complete with loud words, and slammed doors."

Dick gave her a chagrined look and shook his head.

"But that doesn't mean that I love Bruce any less," he said, "nor that I respect his wishes any less."

Dick gave Kory a pleading look that begged for understanding.

"Kory, I just don't want to add any more problems to my relationship with Bruce. In time, I promise . . . we'll tell him. Until then . . . please. Let's do it *my* way?"

Kory nodded reluctantly.

"Very well, Dick," she said. "This is *your* family and I shall respect your wishes. But I disagree with it. I read a Terran quote . . . I can't remember the source . . . that went somewhat like this: 'Oh, what tangled webs we weave, when we first practice to deceive.' I believe that those are good, sobering words."

"MacBeth, I think" Dick said with a grimace. "Thanks. Makes me feel real proud."

Before they could continue their conversation, the doorbell rang. Dick quickly checked his watch. Seven o'clock sharp! Kory jumped from his lap and hurried to check the covered pots and pans that were warming on the stove.

"Quick!" she hissed. "Get the door! I'll get the drinks."

Dick gave her a warning look.

"Yes, Dick, only soft drinks and juice for you and me! Honestly, we can't have wine in our own home just because we're not yet twenty-one. What a world I have selected to become a castaway in."

Dick smiled and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. He then hurried to the front door. As he rushed to greet his guest, Dick's mind quickly flashed back to the day following his arrival in New York . .

.

"I see that security's gone down in my absence."

The others whirled around at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Dick!" Wonder Girl ran up to him and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Dick, we've missed you!"

"Yeah, short pants," Cyborg said. "But, hey, what are we supposed to call you now? 'Guy in Black Tights with Blue Thing Across His Chest'?"

Dick grinned.

"I knew there was a reason I needed to return here. It's always so humbling."

"So, what *do* we call you now, Robbie?" asked Changeling. "*Crow*? *Batwing*?"

Dick smiled at his irreverent teammate.

"Not bad guesses, Gar," he said. "You can call me . . . Nightwing." He shrugged. "Thought it had a sort of pizzazz to it."

"Nightwing," Wonder Girl said, sounding it out. "I like that." She smiled suddenly. "It suits you, Nightwing."

"Thanks. It's great to be home," Dick said, smiling at his welcoming friends. Then in a blink, he turned on his Nightwing persona and instantly became cold and businesslike.

"Now, will someone explain to me how I managed to circumvent twenty security measures and practically waltzed in here without any of you being the wiser?"

The rest of the Titans exchanged chagrined looks. Their leader was back.

. . . Straightening his coat and tie, Dick took a deep breath, and reached for the doorknob. It's now or never, he thought, and opened the door.

Standing there patiently, the picture of perfect British aplomb was Dick's favorite butler, friend, and confidante, Alfred Pennyworth. He was impeccably dressed in a black London Fog overcoat, matching bowler hat, and requisite umbrella. He held a bouquet of red roses for the hostess.

"Alfred!" Dick cried.

Not taking the proffered hand, Dick threw his arms around the man who'd been grandfather, nanny, and available shoulder during his growing up years at Wayne Manor. Dick loved Alfred as much as he loved Bruce. But unlike his relationship with Bruce, he felt free to express his love openly with this loyal, kindly, old man.

"Master Dick!" Alfred said happily. "It is so good to see you again, young sir. Let me take a good look at you."

Alfred held Dick at arms' length, standing back and studying his young charge critically.

"You're thinner, young man . . . and, I'm not sure . . . There's something different about you. I can't quite put my finger on it, yet." He smiled. "But I will."

Dick returned the smile, but dropped his eyes inadvertently. Uh-oh. Alfred was like a terrier when he got an idea in his head. He'd better watch himself tonight, or Alfred would figure out his true relationship with Kory. It wasn't that Dick didn't want Alfred to know; he just didn't want to place Alfred in a compromising position with Bruce. What Alfred didn't know, he wouldn't have to lie about. So, this little white lie was the only solution, Dick told himself again.

Kory entered at this moment.

"Excuse me, Dick," she said. "I just set the drinks up in the living room."

Alfred stared at her dumfounded. He'd met Kory before, but tonight she was, well, dressed to kill. She was wearing a stunning green dress made of a shimmering material that sparkled as she moved. The color exactly matched the green of her unusual eyes, and set off her cinnamon hair and golden skin.

Alfred swallowed, then regained his urbane composure.

"Miss Kory," he said politely. "What a pleasure to see you again." Handing her the roses he was carrying, he added, "These are for you; however, I see that they pale in comparison to your exquisite beauty."

Kory blushed at the compliment.

"Thank you, Alfred. What a nice thing to say." She took a moment to inhale the roses' perfume. "Excuse me, while I put them in water."

The two men nodded.

"Alfred, this way," Dick said, leading his guest to their living room. "What would you care for? We have a fairly limited supply of beverages as you can see. Being underage can have its disadvantages, I'm afraid."

Alfred smiled.

"That's quite all right, Master Dick. Perrier if you have it." Dick

nodded and quickly poured him his drink. "Master Richard," Alfred began.

Uh-oh, Dick thought. Here it comes.

"Sir, it's none of my business, of course, but are you and Miss Kory . . . um . . . how can one ask this delicately?" Alfred stumbled over the question.

"You mean are Kory and I sleeping together?" Dick asked.

Alfred raised an eyebrow at Dick's apparent openness. Dick smiled expansively and shook his head. He crossed his fingers behind his back.

"Don't I *wish*!" He said laughing. "Kory's been great letting me stay with her until I find a place of my own, but do you have any idea what rental properties cost in NYC? A little more than a currently out-of-work college dropout can afford."

"You know that your bank account is always open to you," Alfred admonished him gently.

"And you know why I can't touch Bruce's money, Alfred." Dick started pacing. "Either I'm man enough to make it on my own, or Bruce is right, and I should move back into Wayne Manor and become his obedient little soldier. Besides, this is New York . . . If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere . . . or so they say."

Dick stopped his nervous pacing and gave Alfred a weak smile. He was beginning to feel guilty. He didn't like lying to Alfred, and had never been able to keep up a deception with the Wayne Manor's butler for long. It was like lying to your mother, he thought. Where was Kory? He needed help.

As if sensing his distress, Kory walked in at this moment.

"Dinner's ready!" she announced.

Before they moved to the dining room, an eight by ten portrait of Dick and Bruce caught Alfred's attention. The photograph, a rarity of his two charges, was one of Alfred's favorites. It was taken during Dick's first year at Wayne Manor at the age of nine. He and Bruce were sitting side by side, dressed almost identically in navy blazers, matching ties, white oxford shirts and grey slacks.

Somehow, the photographer had caught them in an unguarded moment between takes. Dick was looking up at his guardian, his smile trusting, touched with just a hint of sadness, while Bruce looked down protectively at his new ward, his hand lightly brushing back an imaginary stray lock of Dick's hair.

Alfred had noticed the portrait missing shortly after Dick left. Now he smiled, an idea suddenly taking shape.

As the dinner progressed, Dick noticed Alfred's surreptitious glances aimed at him and Kory. Dick sighed. He knows. Why did I even bother to lie? Now he felt guilty and foolish. Real adult behavior, Grayson,

he berated himself.

Alfred talked about safe subjects, never once bringing up the question foremost on his mind, nor the reason he'd asked to come to dinner: When was Dick coming home?

Finally, Dick told him.

"I don't think I'll be coming home soon, Alfred. Bruce made the kind of rules I'd have to live under quite clear. I just can't live like that. You *know* I can't."

He paused giving Alfred an intense look from under hooded eyes, and he added bitterly.

"Hell, even *Bruce* knows I can't!"

Dick took a bite from his dinner, chewed, and swallowed almost choking. Then, no longer hungry, he lay his knife and fork down.

"Tell Bruce that I've kept my promise. I'm no longer wearing the Robin costume. I'm no longer Robin. Robin was a little boy, with a little boy's name. Besides, Robin's dead." He paused. "I'm Nightwing now, and Nightwing is the new leader of the Titans. That's all anyone knows about him. For the time being, that's good enough for me."

Alfred nodded his acquiescence.

"I shall, Master Dick; however, I'm sure Master Bruce is already quite aware of Nightwing and who he is. After all, he trained him. He may not approve, young sir, but that does not mean that he isn't proud." Alfred stood up. "He loves you, Master Dick. As surely as he'll be wearing his dark mantle tonight when the sun goes down. He may never say it in words, but that does not make his love for you any less."

Dick stood up, too.

"I know he does, Alfred. What I don't know is if that makes it hurt all the more, or if it helps ease the pain a little." He gave Alfred a rueful half-smile reminiscent of his mentor. "Maybe it does a little of both."

Alfred looked a little sadly at Dick. How alike he and Master Bruce were. Unfortunately, their similarities were currently working against them; their innate stubbornness prevented either one from ever taking the first important step towards reconciliation. Apparently, it was up to Alfred to ensure that the lines of communication remained open.

He allowed himself a private smile. Alfred knew what he was going to do.

"Master Richard, I must ask where the gentleman's room is before I attempt the three hour return trip to Gotham City."

"Sure," Dick said. "I'll show you."

"Oh, please, young sir. Just point me in the right direction. I assure you, I've developed my own Bat-radar in my years of service."

Dick smiled and gave him the necessary directions. Alfred nodded his thanks. When Alfred walked out Dick suddenly collapsed back into his seat.

"He knows," he said flatly.

"How could he?" Kory asked reasonably. "He may suspect, but he can't be sure. I mean we're not wearing signs on our foreheads stating, 'Hey! We're sleeping together!'"

Dick raised his eyebrow sardonically. "Aren't we?"

Kory gave him an exasperated look.

"Come on, help me clear," she said. Dick nodded and began clearing.

A few minutes later, Alfred returned. He'd already put on his long, black overcoat and scarf. Dick quickly walked towards him.

"Well, Master Dick . . . Miss Kory, I'd best be headed home." He looked at his former charge with a touch of sadness. "The Manor is empty without you, Master Dick, and shall remain so until your return."

Dick swallowed a lump in his throat, then hugged his surrogate grandfather in a tight embrace. He felt the hot tears start.

"I miss you, too, Alfred," he whispered fiercely. "I love you."

As they broke their embrace, Dick embarrassed over losing control, looked down. To cover the moment of discomfort, Alfred fussed with Dick's tie and straightened it.

"Master Dick, how often must I show you how to properly tie your tie? A young gentleman cannot go forth into society so disgracefully accoutered!" Dick snorted, the incongruity of the moment suddenly striking him as humorous.

"You're absolutely right, Alfred," he agreed. "What will I do without you?"

"I lay awake at nights contemplating that very problem, sir. I'm afraid the only possible answer is that I must move in with you immediately. Of course, that would put Master Bruce in a rather disadvantaged situation; I couldn't possibly abandon him. He *is* my employer after all . . . I know . . . I'll bring him with me. Oh, Master Dick, you *must* hurry and find your own apartment so that Master Bruce and I can move in with you."

Dick's smile widened into a huge grin.

"Thanks, Alfred. You're the greatest," he said.

"My pleasure, sir. I must be headed out. Take care." The two men shook hands once more. Alfred nodded a polite good-bye to Kory and

walked out.

A few days later, Kory came to Dick with a worried look.

"Dick, ever since Alfred's visit, the portrait of you and Bruce has been missing. I've looked everywhere for it. You don't think that Alfred--?"

"Alfred?! No way!" Dick scoffed. "He loves the portrait, but I know he would've wanted me to have it. Are you sure you've looked everywhere?" he asked.

At Kory's insulted look, he quickly brought his hands up.

"Okay, okay! I'll write him a letter."

Kory stood looking at him, her arms crossed.

"I'll write 'im a letter today, okay?"

Kory didn't say anything.

"I'll write Alfred a letter right now. Is that satisfactory, Your Royal Highness?"

She gave him look that sent a cold shiver of fear through his innards.

"Look," he said smiling weakly. "Pen."

Dick began writing:

Dear Alfred,

I would never say or imply that you either accidentally or intentionally took the 8 x 10 portrait of Bruce and me; however, I don't know that you didn't take it, either. I can only state facts, and the fact remains that the portrait has been missing since you were here for dinner.

Love, Dick

A few days later, Dick received a letter from Alfred. It read as follows:

Dear Master Dick,

I would never say nor imply that you and Miss Kory are sleeping together. I can only state facts, and the fact remains that if Miss Kory *was* sleeping in her own bed, she would have found the portrait by now.

Faithfully yours, Alfred

"What does the letter say?" Kory asked Dick.

"That the moral of the story is: Don't Lie to Alfred!" Dick replied ironically. He kissed her suddenly and smiled into her eyes. He picked up the phone.

"C'mere, hon." Dick pulled her onto his lap. "I think it's time I called home."

The End ####

12

End
file.